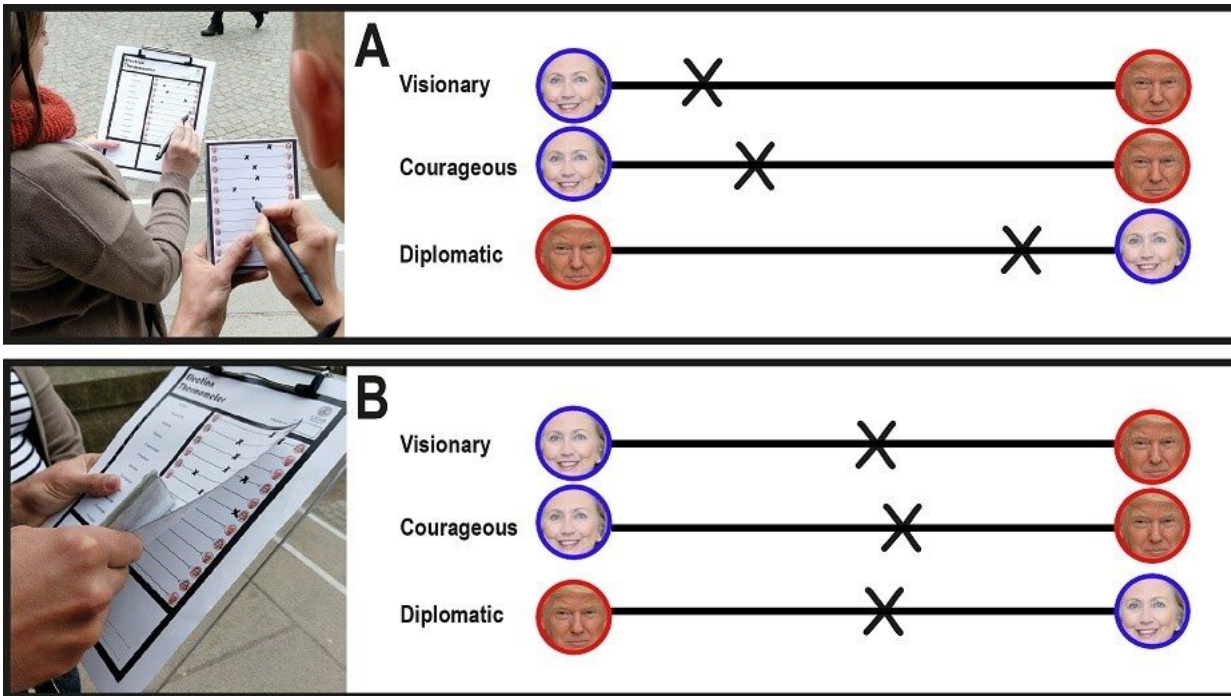


Is it possible to reduce political polarization?

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Using sleight of hand, researchers substituted one score card for another in a survey about the qualities of US presidential candidates. The substituted card was then presented to participants as their own. In the case of 94% of people surveyed, they were ready to accept the more moderate (manipulated) position as their initial one. Figure A shows the initial response of the person surveyed. Figure B shows their manipulated response, which most people surveyed accepted as being their own original response. Credit: McGill University

In the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, an unusual experiment suggested that it might be possible to influence American

voters to adopt less polarized positions.

Posing as political researchers, a research team from McGill and Lund Universities approached 136 voters at the first Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton presidential debate in New York. Participants were asked to compare Trump and Clinton on various leadership traits (such as courage, vision, and analytic skills) by putting an X on a sliding scale.

Using a simple magic trick, the researchers then covertly manipulated the results (by substituting one completed survey sheet for another) so that most of the survey answers appeared moderate, closer to the midpoint between Trump and Clinton. They then presented these more moderate responses to the participants as being their own answers.

Willingness to accept and explain more moderate opinions

Surprisingly, 94 % of the respondents accepted the manipulated responses as being their own answers and readily justified the moderate views. For example, one participant who initially heavily favoured Trump claimed, "I guess I fall somewhere in the middle—I'd like to think I'm a little moderate. I think at this point it's important to be open-minded"—even though they had reported more polarized views moments earlier.

The researchers then replicated this study online with nearly 500 participants and found no difference in the results between Clinton and Trump supporters. The majority of the participants were again susceptible to the manipulation and rationalized their ostensibly moderate responses. Afterwards, to ensure that it did not affect the participants' attitudes in the longer term, the researchers debriefed them and explained the manipulation.

"Political surveys try to capture the attitudes of the public, but our study demonstrates that these can be heavily manipulated," said Jay Olson, co-author on the research paper that will be published this week in *PLOS ONE*. "By making people believe that they wrote down different responses moments earlier, we were able to make them endorse and express less polarized political views. These results offer hope in a divided political climate: even polarized people can become—at least momentarily—open to opposing views."

More information: Thomas Strandberg et al, Depolarizing American voters: Democrats and Republicans are equally susceptible to false attitude feedback, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0226799](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0226799)

Provided by McGill University

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